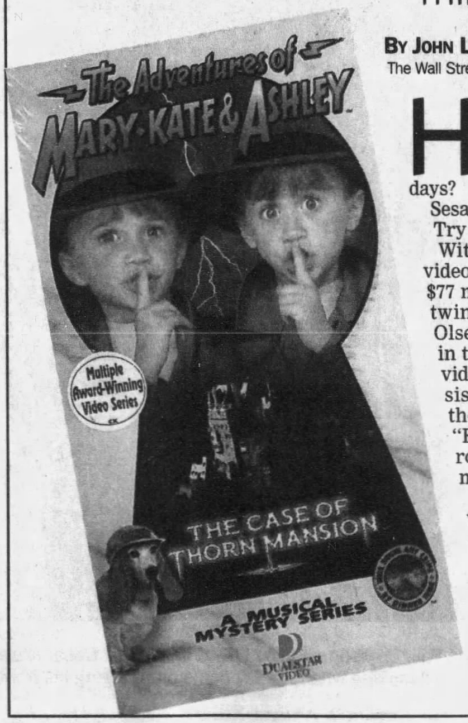
ABC

Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen have made a fortune in television, movies and video — including two productions in which they play tiny detectives.

Twins peak

At age 10, TV and video stars Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen are worth millions to parents and handlers



By John Lippman
The Wall Street Journal

HOLLYWOOD — Quick: After Disney, what is the most popular name in kids' home entertainment these days?

Sesame Street? Barney?

Try Olsen.

With a series of low-budget videocassettes that have raked in $77 million in sales, 10-year-old twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen have taken the No. 1 spot in the nonanimated children's video market. In the process, the sisters, who cut their teeth on the hit ABC television sitcom "Full House," have become heroes to the under-12 set and millionaires to boot.

Thanks to skillful maneuvering by their parents, a careful master plan by an ambitious lawyer-manager and a dearth of movies and videos for young girls, the sisters now sit atop an entertainment empire. Their credits include an eight-season run on network TV, three made-for-TV movies, 14 shows made for home video and a feature film.

"When the girls left the TV show, everybody said their careers were over," says Robert Thorne, 42, the Hollywood lawyer who has carefully orchestrated Mary-Kate and Ashley's acting careers and business dealings since they were 4. Instead, he says, "we decided it was time they could step out."

The girls aren't taking baby steps, either. Dualstar Entertainment Group Inc., the twins' Los Angeles hold-

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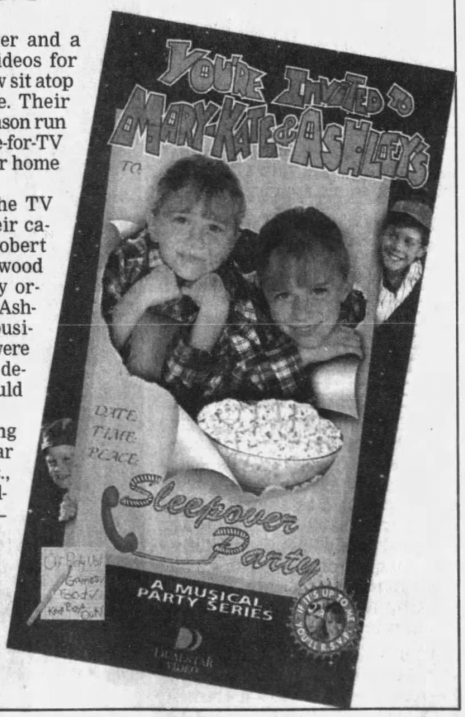

The Olsen twins' two video series have sold more than 6 million copies. Since the end of the TV series 'Full House,' the 10-year-olds have three made-for-TV movies and a feature film in addition to 14 shows made for home video.

TV twins a double mint for handlers, parents

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ing company, now encompasses film and TV production, records, publications and interactive divisions.

Their two video series, "The Adventures of Mary-Kate and Ashley" and "You're Invited to Mary-Kate and Ashley's," have sold more than 6 million units, and now Scholastic Inc. is distributing a line of 14 children's books based on the shows. The video of their first feature film, "It Takes Two," sold 3.2 million copies, bringing in $36 million in revenue to distributor Warner Bros., a unit of Time Warner Inc. Two Olsen music CDs have each sold more than 350,000 copies, and 500,000 copies of their music video have flown off the shelves.

Charm and marketing

In Las Vegas, thousands of children wait in line while Mary-Kate and Ashley sign autographs from inside an air-conditioned bubble; in New York, a line wraps around FAO Schwarz so kids can spend a few seconds single-filing past the girls and waving while parents snap pictures; at Sea World in San Diego, Mary-Kate and Ashley pack a stadium usually reserved for Shamu the Whale.

What's their secret? "They're no Shirley Temple," says Andy Tennant, who directed the twins in "It Takes Two," produced by Rysher Entertainment. "They don't have exquisite talent. What they have is a lot of charm and a huge marketing campaign. That's what sells these days."

For girls who grew up watching the twins on "Full House," Mary-Kate and Ashley are cute, likable role models who sing, dance and throw cool slumber parties. "I like the things they do," says Olea Litewka, who had a slumber party of her own — complete with Olsen videos — for her 9th birthday. She has memorized all the songs on the twins' music videocassette, "Our First Video," which has been on the best-seller charts for the past three years.

"There is nobody competing with them," says Arnold Holland, chief executive of Lightyear Entertainment, an independent video and recording label in New York. "Most TV properties are either aimed at boys or families. It's rare that there are any girl-oriented properties."

In the lucrative home-video market, the Olsens' parents and Thorne have hit upon a sure-fire formula. For "The Adventures of Mary-Kate and Ashley," the girls play two dimpled detectives whose agency motto is "will solve any crime by dinner time." Thorne's wife coined the detectives' nickname, "Trenchcoat Twins."

The story lines are extremely simple: the hunt for Dad's missing "secret computer disk" during a family Caribbean cruise, or the search for something spooky in an amusement park that is scaring customers away from the fun house.

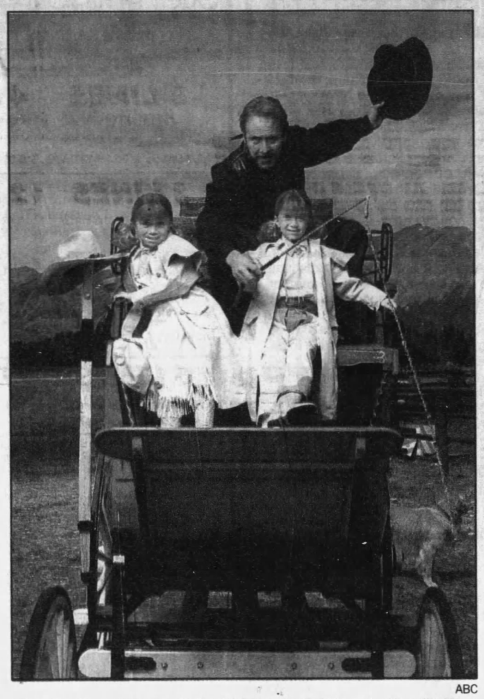
And the videos are shamelessly cross-promotional. In exchange for being featured prominently in the shows, companies like Carnival Cruise Lines, Sea World and U.S. Space Camp cover all lodging, transportation and catering costs on location.

Plugging away

For "The Case of the Hotel Who-Done-It," the twins repeatedly plug the Hilton Hawaiian Village Hotel. "This hotel was so cool, they even had someone who parked our bikes," the twins say, adding that the lobby is "so awesome." Just when it seems the only thing left for them to do is list the hotel's amenities, the girls break into a song during which they raid the minibar, watch in-room movies and chant, "Why can't we live in a hotel all the time?"

The profit margins on the videos are huge. Each half-hour program takes only four to five days to shoot on a shoestring budget of about $250,000, peanuts compared with the $1.6 million it cost to produce one episode of "Full House." Yet every one of the dozen videos released so far has sold several hundred thousand units, at $12.95 apiece. After distribution and marketing costs, Dualstar's royalties to date have exceeded $6 million.

Two more videos will hit stores soon, "The Case of the U.S. Navy Adventure" and "The Case of the Mystery Volcano"; the latter is timed to capitalize on two volcano films in theaters this year. Thorne is negotiating a second deal with Warner Home Video for the girls to produce six more videos and is developing a second TV series and another feature film.



ABC

When the Olsen twins made the 1994 made-for-TV movie 'How the West Was Fun,' which also starred Martin Mull, their apprearance fee hit $1 million. It propelled them to their first theatrical film, 'It Takes Two.'

The selling of the Olsen twins began when they were just 4 months old, when their mother, Jarnette, took them to an audition for "Full House" to play the role of Michelle Tanner. Producers often look for twins to play a juvenile role because labor laws restrict the hours children are permitted to work.

The sugary sitcom was a big hit for ABC, and soon network research revealed that Mary-Kate and Ashley had a higher "Q rating" — a measure of a star's popularity — among girls than Henry Winkler had when he played The Fonz on "Happy Days" or Michael J. Fox had on "Family Ties."

The girls' compensation rose with the show's popularity, from $2,400 per episode at the start of the series to $80,000 an episode for both of them during the last season. They will continue to earn substantial syndication profits from "Full House" for years to come: So far, Dualstar has collected at least $3 million of such proceeds, a figure that could triple by the time all revenues are received. Thorne and the girls' parents decline to discuss Dualstar's profits.

The littlest producers

The move to establish a production company for the girls began in early 1993 as they started breaking out of their "Full House" role. Alan Berger, head of the TV department at talent agency International Creative Management, remembers meeting with Thorne shortly after the Olsens' first made-for-TV movie, "To Grandmother's House We Go," became one of the season's top TV movies in December 1992. Berger's client Jeff Franklin, who had directed the movie and created "Full House," had worked with the twins for eight years, sometimes waving a cookie to elicit a response from them. Now he wanted to become executive producer of the twins' second TV movie.

But Thorne had a different plan. "The girls are going to be executive producers," he told Berger, who winced at the suggestion. "The girls? But their combined ages are 12," Berger protested. "Yeah," Thorne acknowledged, "but they're going to carry the movie."

Berger's client opted out. "I just couldn't deal with the absurdity of having Jeff Franklin report to two 6-year-olds," Berger says, shaking his head. Thorne, he says, "wanted to establish them as executive producers and run it through their own company."

Sure enough, by the time the second TV movie, "Double, Double, Toil and Trouble" appeared in 1993, Dualstar Productions was listed as a co-producer. Of course, Mary-Kate and Ashley didn't actually hire the writer and director. Instead, the move was the first step in "empowering" the girls and their company, Thorne explains.

Mary-Kate and Ashley took in $500,000 for each of the first two TV movies. For their third TV movie, "How the West Was Fun," their fee doubled to $1 million. "That was their price," says Jim Green, whose company produced the shows. The shows did well, both on ABC and in video sales, and the next obvious step was to put the girls in a theatrical film.

The film "It Takes Two" paired the girls with actors Steve Guttenberg and Kirstie Alley. For their roles as identical rich girl/poor girl who conspire to have their respective guardians fall in love, they earned $1.6 million. The $14 million film garnered only $19.5 million at the box office, but gushed a hefty $75 million in home-video retail sales, making it Warner Home Video's fourth-biggest seller ever in the family category.

'Like the Beatles'

"They are an unexplainable phenomenon," says Tennant, the director. He recalls with amazement a day when three packed school buses passed near the movie's set in New York's Little Italy and came to a stop three blocks away. "Ten minutes later there was this stampede of 75 children who had gotten off the bus all screaming. . . . It looked like the Beatles. They swarmed the set. Everything came to a standstill."

The girls live in Southern California with an older brother, a younger sister and their parents, who are divorced and have joint custody. The twins attend a private Christian academy, where they are in different classes and have separate groups of friends. They got straight A's on their last report card.

Their father, David Olsen, says Mary-Kate and Ashley's personal welfare and education have always come first, and they aren't under any pressure to act. "From very early on, it's been about controlling their environment," says Olsen, a mortgage banker and one of the country's top amateur golfers. "It's not just throwing them to the wolves. They like acting. As soon as they stop enjoying it, it ends."

Asked what she wants to do when she grows up, Ashley is ready with a response: "I really like acting. It's a lot of fun." She also mentions directing. Mary-Kate says she wants to train dolphins and whales, preferably at Sea World.

Still, the girls' parents defer to Thorne on even the smallest of career matters. "Robert likes them in baseball caps," Olsen says to Harold Weitzberg, the marketing director for Dualstar, one afternoon as Mary-Kate and Ashley are having their hair styled for a publicity photo shoot. "I don't want him yelling at me," the father says.

Thorne comes up with story ideas for the girls' videos and works with the writers. One day, he says, he found himself thinking, "Let's put them on Jet Skis." In a flash, the girls were filming their next video: "You're Invited to Mary-Kate and Ashley's Hawaiian Beach Party."

$10 weekly allowances

A fierce negotiator with a laconic outward manner, Thorne spent several years at a Los Angeles law firm, carving out a niche in children's entertainment. He also represents R.L. Stine, author of the blockbuster "Goosebumps" series of books, and the child actor Jonathan Taylor Thomas from "Home Improvement." He recently opened his own practice, Thorne & Co., with two other lawyers.

Thorne keeps his eyes on creative details. When he walks onto the set of the WB network sitcom "Sister, Sister," where Mary-Kate and Ashley are making a guest appearance, he glances up on the sign where their names are painted in red letters. "There's no hyphen in Mary-Kate's name," Thorne notices. "I hate it when they do that." Within minutes, two scenery carpenters are up on a ladder to paint in a hyphen.

When the girls have a problem, Thorne is often the first person they call. Once after a morning of acting that had gone badly, Mary-Kate was being interviewed by a TV crew. Suddenly, she turned to one of the production assistants and said: "I want a phone. I want to call Robert."

A call was swiftly put through to Thorne's office. "I don't want to do this interview. I had a bad morning. The interviewer is dumb," Thorne recalls Mary-Kate telling him.

The twins glide from set to set in a large entourage that often includes a lawyer, marketing manager, nanny, tutor and a personal acting coach. At the center are two extremely mild little girls who appear oblivious to the money-making machine around them. Their allowance is just $10 a week. Asked during a break in the taping of "Sister, Sister" whether they understand the business they have spawned, Mary-Kate and Ashley shake their heads "no" in identical movements.

While shooting "It Takes Two," Tennant, the director, overheard the girls discussing their salary. Ashley figured they must be making $5 a week, their allowance at the time. "No way," Mary-Kate protested. "We got to be making at least $10."

"People say to them: 'What's it like to be a millionaire?' They just get this glazed look on their face," says Barbara Daoust, their acting coach.

Too 'ubiquitous'

By law, more than half the profits from Dualstar Entertainment must go into a trust for the girls. The parents are allowed to take a percentage as a "management fee," but they decline to disclose the amount; Thorne calls it "nominal."

With the girls now 10, Thorne is heading into a delicate phase of their career, one that has turned many child stars before them into troubled teens and trivia-quiz answers.

"The kids are going through a transition right now. As they mature, they are going to have to reinvent themselves," says Jim Green, the producer who works on their TV movies. "They can't continue to do the same stories they have been doing. When the kids become teen-agers, it will be interesting to see what happens."

Though the girls are in heavy demand — "Rosie O'Donnell's been after me for weeks," Thorne says — they aren't doing any TV interviews now. "We don't do the electronic media anymore. It's overkill," Thorne says. "After a while, the word 'ubiquitous' was cropping up too much. . . . The family wanted them to take some time off, step back, and come back fresh."

Thorne says he wants to start limiting the girls' projects as well. He says he has turned down merchandising and licensing bonanzas, from "lunchboxes to horrible network specials."

"That's exploitative," he says. "It doesn't build a career."